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MONEY SPENT ON TRAINING IS OFTEN WASTED, CLAIM AUTHORS

By Dina Medland September 5, 2013

Most business training is a waste of time and money and organisations need to call a halt to current practices and reconsider their approach.

These are the hard-hitting views of Tom Bird and Jeremy Cassell, authors of the recently published Financial Times Guide to Business Training.

Vast amounts of money are spent – the book refers to almost £40bn on business training in the UK alone in 2008, pointing out that this is “slightly more than the 2012 UK budget for education. The US spends far more.

The problem is, as the book states in its first line: “Business training doesn’t work.” It puts the cart before the horse, by reversing the logical order of things.

The authors say that as companies increasingly struggle to find a competitive advantage in difficult markets, they adopt a “band-aid” approach to problems, rather than a holistic one.

At best, employees are trained to enable them to complete certain tasks they could not previously do; at worst, everyone is thrown together on a “business training” jaunt to a smart hotel, which is treated as “a jolly”, rather than a serious enabling exercise.

“A big barrier to learning effectiveness is that you give people the ‘what’ before you have built up the ‘why’,” says Mr Bird, who explains that not enough time and thought is given to what the organisation is trying to achieve, and on the strategy needed to accomplish it.

Those in charge of training need to raise their game substantially, the authors say. They need to move away from a “cost centre” mentality to one of improving and maximising performance. For that, they need better engagement with higher levels in the organisation to bring learning and development, along with HR, closer to the strategic thinking in the boardroom.

Mr Bird and Mr Cassell are founding partners and co-owners of the Møller PSF Group, a consultancy advising professional services firms on training and coaching, affiliated to Cambridge University. They are also the authors of *Brilliant Selling*, a practical guide to selling, published in 2009 and since translated into eight languages with nearly 50,000 copies sold.

Mr Bird uses sales training as an example of where things go wrong. At first sight, it might seem straightforward but it is often approached from the wrong perspective. “What counts is whether it results in transfer of learning to the work environment,” he says.

Mr Cassell adds: “It is about an improvement in someone’s performance which has a real impact on results.” But the pair agree that sales training is often focused around pitching and presentation skills, which could be completely the wrong starting place.

“Those responsible for learning and development should first be challenging the stakeholders on why there is a need for training and why good performance isn’t happening,” says Mr Bird. He returns to his sales example: “Are the salespeople presenting to the wrong people? Do they have the confidence to aim at the C-suite instead? All business training needs an analysis phase that is critical to its success.”

The authors start from the viewpoint that all business training should revolve around current, specific business challenges and the way an organisation needs to change in order to remain competitive. This avoids the “sheep dip” approach often followed by businesses, which treats training as a uniform process.

Many of the ideas in the book are built on questions about whether it is possible to “teach” behaviour, because the authors believe training is all about “influence”. In one chapter, they list the three elements needed “to influence more people more of the time”: confidence, credibility and connection.

A trainer’s belief in their own ability (confidence), their believability (credibility) and a harmonious rapport with the group (connection), together create a “model of influencing” which they consider essential to the delivery of any business training. It is a mixture of psychology, analysis, empathy and better communication skills, including the use of body language.

“All great performers understand the power of three,” the authors say in the book, and they explain how a business trainer can make sessions “more memorable, to create easy structures and to communicate with impact.

In cash-strapped times, a book that poses serious questions for senior management about the value of training might be welcome.

For if, as Mr Bird and Mr Cassell claim, training is all about influence and changing behaviour, its key strength lies in both business and trainers remaining flexible.

“If we do our job right, we should be asking ‘why’ a lot of the time. If we are to do our job well, it’s a question of how well it all gets absorbed by the rest of the business,” says Mr Cassell.

He agrees that it could resemble the role of an adviser, or how a non-executive director functions in a boardroom. “The role of an external consultant should be to bring challenge and operate at the edge of discomfort,” says Mr Bird. And that, the authors agree, is where business training should sit.

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